

We Need to Recognise Jo Cox's Murder as an Act of Far-Right Terrorism

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In the early afternoon of Thursday 16 June, British MP Jo Cox was murdered. On the way to a local library for a meeting with her constituents, she was confronted by an armed man shouting “Britain first”. The man, Thomas Mair, proceeded to shoot and stab her multiple times before fleeing. Police and paramedics were called, but by 14:00 she had been pronounced dead at the scene.

The murder of an elected representative will never be an apolitical affair, but Jo's case has already prompted questions over the selective application of criminal culpability. There can be no question that Mair was motivated by far-Right sentiments; in addition to his shouts at the murder scene, before court last week he declared his name as ‘death to traitors, freedom for Britain’. And yet, like many recent white terrorists, he is being treated as mentally-ill lone wolf, a ruined mind to be pored over by psychologists. The main problem with the term ‘lone wolf’ in media discourse is its presumption that the perpetrator has acted completely on his or her own initiative. Instead, lone wolves are usually radicalised within a far-Right milieu through extremist literature, conversations with other like-minded ideologues and, more recently, internet fora and social media. This also includes radicalisation within a wider climate where nativist, xenophobic and anti-immigrant stances – once on the margins of political discourse – are becoming increasingly mainstream.

This is not to say that mental illness does not play a *part* in the radicalisation of far-Right terrorists. Prosecutors over the coming months will seek to determine Mair's mental state and, crucially, the extent to which he can be considered responsible for his actions. It is worth noting that in two other high-profile cases of far-Right lone wolf terrorism – David Copeland's 1999 nail bomb attack and Anders Breivik's 2011 bomb attack and shooting spree – mental health was presumed to be an issue, yet neither were absolved of their responsibility for the attacks when eventually convicted. Thus, it is clear that far-Right ideology has played an equal or possibly greater role than mental illness in motivating Jo's murder.

In political terms, therefore, psychologising the affair is entirely insufficient – it is an insult to the memory of Jo, as well as the countless others who have suffered at the hands of far-Right violence. Neither is it a matter of racial prejudice, though it is true that politicians and journalists alike regularly get away with outrageous generalisations in the wake of Islamist attacks, holding up the perpetrators as somehow representative of all Muslims worldwide. No, the real issue is that the attitudes that legitimate such acts of terror are still embedded in our societies, and in many respects the situation is worsening.

This is why the apportionment of culpability for Jo's death is such an uncomfortable topic. Mair may have wielded the gun and the knife, but behind him stand all those who have helped perpetuate the narrative of national betrayal. The vast majority of them – tabloid journalists, populist politicians, ‘contrarian’ commentators – will have been as horrified by Mair's actions as everyone else. Nevertheless, they cannot wish away their part in creating the conditions under which one man became convinced that murder was his patriotic duty. Lone wolf terrorists may act alone, but they do not develop in a vacuum.

At a time when mainstream politicians lack worldly experience and travel light on convictions, Jo was everything that an MP should be; a former international development worker, she was a tireless campaigner for social justice both at home and abroad. After winning her parliamentary seat last year, she used her maiden speech to the House of Commons to warn against the dangers of a politics that pits different ethnic and religious groups against one another. Her murder is nothing less than an act of terrorism – terrorism perpetrated by far-Right ideology against the ideals of solidarity and humanism for which she stood.

As such, and regardless of the eventual verdict on his mental health, Mair should be treated not as an ordinary murderer but a terrorist. And, in Jo's memory, we must redouble our efforts to combat the seeds of far-Right ideology - seeds that have been cast much farther than many believe.